

What Young Women Leaders Want: Echoes from the Next Generation

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In March, 132 senior women executives told us how to reach the C-suite. Six months later, we asked the next generation of women leaders what they want, and their answers did not quite match the advice.

Earlier this year we put one question to [132 women executives](#) across 45 countries. What advice would they give women earlier in their careers who aspire to top roles? Their answers converged on five themes with unusual consistency: move before you feel ready, get sponsors rather than just mentors, make your work visible, build breadth across the business, and stay authentic while building a support system that lasts. The initiative drew a warm response across the firm and far beyond it. Advice, though, only travels in one direction.

So, this time we turned the microphone around. We went back to young women professionals and put four questions to them: what support would you value most, whom would you ask for career advice, what kind of coaching would you choose, and what stands between you and top management? Some answers confirmed what the senior generation had said in March. Others surprised us. Some sharply so.

ECHOES FROM THE NEXT GENERATION

We turned the microphone around

In March, 132 senior women executives across 45 countries shared their advice for reaching the C-suite. This follow-up flips the exchange. We asked young women professionals four questions about their own needs.

- 1 What support would you value most from senior leaders?
- 2 Whom would you ask for career advice?
- 3 What kind of coaching would you choose?
- 4 What stands between you and top management?

Source: Stanton Chase Next Generation survey, 2026

Young Women Leaders Want Sponsorship More Than Advice

Asked how senior leaders could best support them, respondents put trust and ownership first. Give us challenging responsibilities, they said, and the autonomy to carry them. Sponsorship and visibility came second; mentorship and feedback third, followed by exposure to high-level work and longer-term career guidance. Advice on its own, however well meant, ranked nowhere near the top.

WHAT THEY VALUE MOST

Sponsorship beats advice for young women leaders

Ranked support preferences from young women professionals. Being trusted with serious responsibility came first, ahead of any form of advice.

- 1 Trust and ownership**
Hand over challenging responsibilities with full autonomy.
- 2 Sponsorship and visibility**
Open doors and advocate in senior rooms
- 3 Mentorship and feedback**
Share experience and give honest input
- 4 Exposure and networks**
Provide access to high-level work and connections
- 5 Career guidance**
Guide preparation for long-term leadership roles

Source: Stanton Chase Next Generation survey, 2026

That preference has recent evidence behind it. McKinsey and LeanIn.Org's [Women in the Workplace](#) research found that employees with sponsors have been promoted at nearly twice the rate of those without, and that women are less likely than men to have a sponsor at every stage of the pipeline. Mentors advise and encourage, while sponsors advocate and spend their influence. The second moves careers. The Center for Creative Leadership makes a matching case for building a [network of champions](#), since men remain more likely than women to have sponsors. The young women in our sample understood this faster than many companies have.

WHY SPONSORSHIP MATTERS

2x Employees with sponsors have been promoted at nearly twice the rate of those without them. Women remain less likely than men to have a sponsor at every stage of the pipeline.

Source: McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org, Women in the Workplace, 2025

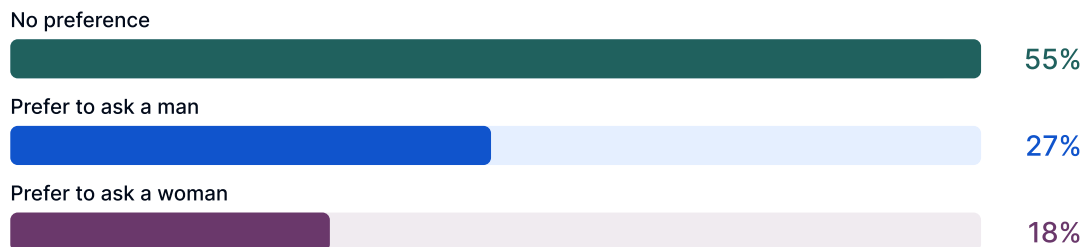
Whom Do Young Women Ask for Career Advice? Often, Men

A majority of respondents, 55%, said gender plays no role in whom they approach for guidance. Among those with a preference, though, men came out ahead. Some 27% would sooner ask a man, against 18% who would sooner ask a woman.

WHERE THEY TURN FOR ADVICE

Whom would you rather ask for career advice?

A majority express no gender preference. Among those who do, men come out slightly ahead of women.



Source: Stanton Chase Next Generation survey, 2026

That finding will sit uncomfortably with anyone who has poured their heart into gender diversity work. However, an honest reading helps more than a defensive one. It also echoes something we heard in March. Several of the 132 senior executives advised younger women to build alliances with men, who still hold most positions with the power to promote. A 2025 [study of women leaders](#) in Gender, Work & Organization found the same in practice: women who reached senior roles were predominantly sponsored by men. Seen that way, the preference looks pragmatic rather than personal. Young women go where the influence is. As more women hold that influence, the numbers should move with them.

Why Do Young Women Prefer Private Coaching to Company Programs?

The second surprise concerned coaching. Given the choice, 82% of respondents preferred a private, individual coaching arrangement, while 18% chose their company's leadership and coaching offerings. The margin startled us. A gap that wide cannot be waved away as a rounding error or a taste for exclusivity.

COACHING PREFERENCES

Private coaching wins by a wide margin

Share of young women professionals choosing each option when asked which they would prioritize.



A question for leadership development: is this a wish for privacy, or a verdict on how corporate programs feel from the inside?

Source: Stanton Chase Next Generation survey, 2026

Coaching itself holds up well under scrutiny. A meta-analysis of [37 randomized trials](#) covering more than 2,500 participants found moderate positive effects on leadership and personal outcomes. The effects were somewhat larger for women. The method works. What seems to fail is the packaging around it. A program designed by the employer, delivered inside the employer's walls, and visible to the employer may feel unsafe for exactly the conversations that matter most: doubts, ambitions, family plans, and frictions with the people upstairs. Companies that want their development spending to count could take the hint. Offer confidential coaching that participants choose for themselves, before commissioning another cohort curriculum.

The Barriers to Top Management Are Organizational, Not Personal

Across every answer about obstacles, one thing was almost absent: doubt about capability. Respondents rarely questioned whether they could do the job. What they named instead were missing sponsors, thin visibility, glass ceilings and slow promotion tracks, unsupportive managers, and the difficulty of squaring leadership ambitions with family life. Confidence and readiness appeared only fourth on the list, well behind the organizational factors.

WHAT STANDS IN THE WAY

The barriers are organizational, not personal

Ranked obstacles on the way to top management. Doubts about capability appear only fourth, well behind factors companies control.

- 1 Lack of sponsorship and visibility**
Missing advocates and limited access to senior opportunities
- 2 Organizational barriers**
Glass ceilings, slow promotions, unsupportive managers, and bureaucracy
- 3 Career and family balance**
The squeeze between leadership ambitions and family life
- 4 Confidence and readiness**
Personal hurdles such as confidence and perfectionism
- 5 Recognition of different profiles**
Non-traditional paths and styles going unrewarded

Source: Stanton Chase Next Generation survey, 2026

A 2025 *Frontiers in Sociology* analysis makes the same argument. Open exclusion has largely faded, it says. Much of what remains consists of [invisible mechanisms](#) embedded in ordinary working practices. Think of promotion criteria that penalize career breaks, demands for constant availability, networks that recycle the same names, and assumptions about how a leader sounds.

Which Leadership Behaviors Hold Young Women Back?

We also asked about the leaders who had held them back. Nobody complained about pressure or high standards. Their frustration went to leaders who fail to advocate for talent, who let bias and favoritism steer progression, who micromanage, or who communicate poorly and model little worth copying. The mirror image appeared when we asked what had helped. Trust and empowerment topped that list, followed by sponsorship and coaching, then honest feedback and executive presence, then role models, networks, and wider business exposure. The two rankings separate leaders who manage performance from leaders who build people. Demanding work never featured as a complaint. The objections pointed at leadership that fails to back its people.

LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS, RANKED

What held them back, and what moved them forward

HELD THEM BACK

- 1 Absent advocacy and exclusion from opportunities
- 2 Bias, favoritism, stereotypes, and unequal access
- 3 Micromanagement and low trust
- 4 Poor communication and weak role modeling

HELPED THEM FORWARD

- 1 Trust and empowerment through true ownership
- 2 Active sponsorship and coaching
- 3 Honest feedback and executive presence
- 4 Visible role models and wider business exposure

Source: Stanton Chase Next Generation survey, 2026

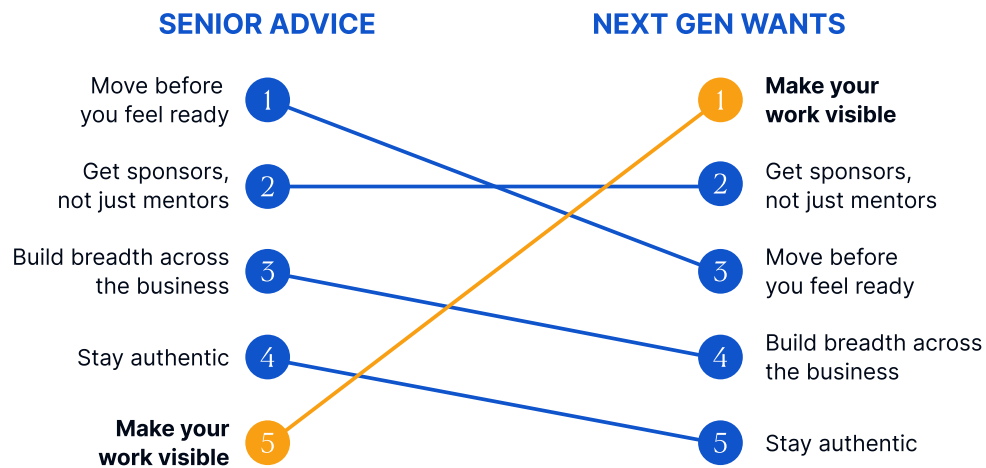
What Senior Women Advised vs. What Young Women Want

Both generations rank sponsorship second, a rare point of agreement. Beyond that, the orders diverge. Senior executives put “move before you feel ready” first and visibility last of five. The next generation reverses that almost exactly, ranking visibility first and courage third. Executives who have already arrived preach the leap. The generation still climbing wants to be seen while making it.

TWO GENERATIONS COMPARED

Seniors preach the leap. The next generation asks to be seen.

Ranking of the same five themes: the advice senior women executives gave in March against the support young women say they would value most.



Source: Stanton Chase Next Generation survey, 2026



How Can Senior Leaders Support the Next Generation of Women Executives?

The young women we heard from were specific, and what they ask for costs less than most leadership programs.

- Sponsor by name, in the rooms where stretch roles get decided
- Hand over responsibilities that carry weight, early, with the autonomy to succeed or to stumble
- Give direct feedback often, not once a year at review time
- Make good work visible to decision-makers
- Help people combine senior ambitions with family life, because that combination, not any lack of drive, is where many pipelines crack.

Six months ago we asked what the women at the top had learned on the way up. Now the next generation has answered. Most of what they want, one leader with standing can give them. Over the next few years, where these women choose to build their careers will tell us more plainly than any survey which companies listened.



About the Authors



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